TURKEY COVE RUFFED GROUSE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT: SCENIC RESOURCES

Issue Statement:

There is a concern for the impacts the proposed project and associated alternatives may have on various aspects of the recreation opportunities including the scenic resources of the project area.

Scope of the Analysis:

The geographic bounds for this scenery analysis include the geographic area with views to the project area from primary travelways outside of the project area and roads and trails within the project area boundary. The travelways analyzed are US 23 and Alt US 58 which are Concern Level 1 roads, and two Concern Level 3 travelways - Wallen Ridge Trail and State Route 611 (Lovelady Creek). There are no developed recreation sites within or in the immediate vicinity of the project area. High Knob Tower, a Concern Level 1 observation site, was included in the scope of this analysis; it is located approximately 10 miles northeast of the project area.

Each proposed treatment unit was evaluated from viewpoints established on these travelways, and from the High Knob Tower. This analysis determines if the proposed actions will meet the Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIOs) established in the Jefferson National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan (Forest Plan) or could meet them using design criteria to reduce visual contrasts to the existing landscape character.

The analysis considers and incorporates projects that occurred in the past that remain visible and influence the existing landscape character, and considers reasonably foreseeable future actions.

Definitions for Common Scenery Management System Terms:

Historically the Forest Service used the term “visual resource” and since the 1970’s established Visual Quality Objectives in Forest Plans. In 1995 the USDA Handbook was revised to include a change to scenery and establishing Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIO’s) in Forest Plans. To this day, especially in planning documents including this one, the terms visuals and visual resource are used interchangeably with the terms scenery and scenic resource.

Scenic Class is a system of classification describing the importance or value of a particular landscape or portions of that landscape. Values in this classification system range from 1 (highest value) to 7 (lowest value). Using a process provided in the USDA handbook, the Scenic Classes are derived from the following scenery inventory data:

- Scenic Attractiveness is inventoried as A, B or C. A is distinctive, B is typical, and C is indistinctive.
- Concern Levels (also referred to as sensitivity levels) are a measure of the degree of public importance placed on landscapes viewed from travelways and use areas. They are inventoried as 1, 2 or 3 with 1 being high use travelways and viewing points and 3 being the low use travelways and viewing points.
- Distance Zones are mapping divisions used as a measure of the degree of detail that is typically discernible to casual observers. The 3 distance zones are:
  - Foreground (FG) which extends 0 to ½ mile from the viewer (with a sub-category of Immediate Foreground (I-FG) that extends from the viewer to a distance of about 300 feet).
  - Middleground (MG) is from ½ mile to 4 miles from the observer.
  - Background (BG) is from 4 miles to infinity.

Based on the specific management objectives for each prescription area, the inventoried scenic classes are used to establish the SIO’s in the Forest Plan.

SIOs are measurable standards for the management of scenery on public lands, and are mapped and established as part of the Forest Plan. In managing scenery, degrees of scenic integrity are defined within a range from Very High to Low. Within the TCRGHIP project area, the established SIOs are High, Moderate and Low, however no timber activities are proposed within the Low SIO area; prescribed fire is planned within the Low SIO area. Under the High SIO, management activities are not noticeable to the casual observer. Under the Moderate SIO activities may be noticeable but remain visually subordinate to the valued landscape character. Under the Low SIO, management activities may be noticeable to the casual observer and begin to dominate the landscape character, but must borrow from attributes of scale, form, shape, line, color and/or texture of the valued landscape character. Analysis includes determining the deviations from the valued (typically existing) landscape character resulting from management activities. These are characterized as changes to form/shape, scale, line, color and texture.

For additional explanation of these and other terms associated with the Scenery Management System, refer to the Forest Plan or Agriculture Handbook Number 701, Landscape Aesthetics: A Handbook for Scenery Management, 1995.

Existing Situation:

The existing landscape character within the project area is comprised of the visual attributes of the southeast side of Wallen Ridge. This mountainside has moderate to steep slopes predominantly covered in deciduous hardwood forest with an evergreen component, as well as several large patches of evergreen. Human alterations are evident in the presence of Forest Service roads and road features (culverts, bridges, signs, gates) as well as closed roadbeds and skid trails. Past timber harvesting activities are visible from the immediate foreground to the middleground as viewed from various travelways. These appear as openings in the canopy and discernible variations in the density of the canopy (color and texture changes) and to a lesser extent the height of the canopy within old management units compared to surrounding forest. Viewed in the middleground distance zone, FS roads within the project area are discernible as spotty linear openings in the canopy. Outside of the project area, the landscape character on private lands include developments such as roads and road appurtenances, railway features, residences, commercial businesses, industrial uses, timber activities, farms, and open fields, all interspersed with forested tracts.

Generally in mountain settings, the obvious human altered landscapes are in the valleys, while the upper elevations and ridges tend to remain more natural appearing with intact or mostly intact forest canopy. This is substantially true for the existing landscape in the immediate vicinity of the project area, The most noticeable alterations are at the lower elevations on private lands in the valley below the project area. However, in the geographic area surrounding the project area, there are human altered landscapes visible at higher elevations and on ridgetops including mining, residential, a prison, observation tower, and associated roads and parking areas associated with these developments. For motorists traveling at higher speeds on US 23 and Alt US 58, these altered landscapes are viewed only minutes or seconds from the view of the project area, and comprise with FS lands the landscape character. The boundary between private and public lands is nebulous or completely unknown to most travelers on these high speed roads.

Management Prescriptions Outlined in the Forest Plan:

As stated above, the Forest Plan establishes SIOs for every management prescription area based on the inventoried Scenic Classes. For the TCRGHIP project area, the Scenic Classes present are 1 and 2, and the Management Prescriptions are Scenic Corridors (7B) and Ruffed Grouse/Woodcock Habitat Emphasis (8E1). The SIOs are:

	7B Scenic Corridor	8E1 Grouse Habitat
Scenic Class 1	High	High
Scenic Class 2	High	Moderate
Scenic Class 5		Low

To accommodate meeting the SIOs, the implementation of Alternative 1 would utilize the appropriate measures and design criteria described in Chapter 2 of the EA as well as in the Landscape and Scenery Management Approach, Scenery Treatment Guide (Table 3-3) contained in Chapter 3 of the Forest Plan.

Direct and Indirect Effects of the Alternatives:

Alternative 1

For the visual resource analysis, 20 viewpoints were established on three roads, one trail and one observation tower to determine the effects of the proposed action on national forest scenery. An appendix to this report includes the details of the analysis. A brief summary of the analysis follows.

High SIO: The proposed wildlife management activities within the area of High SIO are not expected to be noticeable to the casual observer from observation points included in the analysis. To meet the High SIO, projects may be technically visible, but should not be noticeable to the casual observer. This is possible due to a number of factors that include but may not be limited to angle of view, aspect of the viewer to the modified landscape, duration of view, speed of the travelway, and/or the presence of other similar appearing features in the landscape. In highly altered settings such as exists along the US 23 corridor, the landscape can absorb some additional change without drawing the notice of the casual observer. The scenery analysis supports that management activities included in Alternative 1 should not be noticeable to the casual observer.

Moderate SIO: Alternative 1 would result in some of the management activities in the Moderate SIO areas being visible and noticeable to the casual observer from locations on US 23 and potentially from points on the Wallen Ridge Trail. These will introduce additional changes in line, color and texture within the existing landscape. These visible changes will be more noticeable during leaf-on seasons and during times of the day that darker, longer shadows are cast around the edges of new openings. The openings will also be more noticeable when there is snow or very heavy frost on the ground.

To meet the Moderate SIO, management activities may be noticeable to the casual observer but should not begin to dominate the landscape character viewed. The changes introduced by this project will be similar to other existing openings found on the sideslopes of mountains throughout the local region (inside and outside of the project area). Forest Service management activities in the project area, though infrequent, have historically contributed to the landscape character visible from US 23. Some of those continue to be visible as patches of tree canopy of a different height, texture and/or color. Existing FS Roads in the project area create line segments clearly visible in the existing landscape viewed from the middleground on US 23. As described under the Existing Situation section above, the casual observer on travelways typically cannot discern between private lands and Forest Service lands, particularly those viewed in the middleground distance zone from moderate and high speed roads. The whole of mountainsides and ridges within the viewed middleground contributes to the existing landscape character, including altered landscapes that exist on private lands. The scale (size, number, spacing), shapes, and in some instances the orientation and aspect to the viewer, will assure that the new openings introduced by management activities included in Alternative 1 would mimic and blend with the existing visible alterations, and not begin to dominate the landscape character.

Prescribed Fire within High, Moderate and Low SIO: The prescribed fire proposed in Alternative 1 will result in temporary blackening along the ground that will be visible in the foreground and would likely be visible during leaf-off when viewed from the middleground within the first year. Management activities need to meet the SIO within one year of project completion. In this climate, herbaceous vegetation recovers quickly and reduces the visibility of the burned area after one growing season so that it is no longer noticeable to the casual observer.

Incorporating design criteria as indicated in Chapter 2 of the Environmental Assessment, all proposed actions for Alternative 1 would meet the Scenic Integrity Objectives of High and Moderate established in the Forest Plan for the land within the project area.

Alternative 2 (No Action)

There would be no immediate or short-term effect to the scenic resource resulting from this alternative. No visible changes would be introduced within the project area. Over time, the existing evidence of past projects would continue to fade as trees within regenerated units reach the canopy height of surrounding forest. There would be little variation of form, line, color or texture except the difference between the predominantly deciduous forest canopy and the patches of predominantly evergreen canopy. As long as FS roads within the project area are maintained, they will likely continue to be visible as a patchy linear line when viewed from the middleground.

The Scenery Management Handbook includes a discussion about scenic integrity. It states that a landscape character goal of high scenic integrity should also be one of high ecosystem integrity. Providing a high level of scenic integrity may in some cases have to be achieved through establishing an "ecological aesthetic" over time through knowledge and appreciation of how a healthy ecosystem functions and how we as humans fit into it (USDA Handbook Number 701, 1995, page 2-2). The Handbook does not provide a process for, nor does it direct that a process be undertaken, to establish an "ecological aesthetic". However it should be noted that the USDA Handbook acknowledges that high scenic integrity should be accompanied by a healthy ecosystem. Alternative 2 would not meet the ecological objectives identified in the purpose and need statements.

Without conducting prescribed burning to reduce fuels, there would be no short-term blackening of the ground visible from travelways. However, untreated fuels contribute to the potential at some point in time for a wildland fire that burns hot enough to result in large areas of tree mortality. Such a fire within the project area would significantly change the landscape character viewed from US 23, other travelways and use areas in the vicinity.

Cumulative Effects

All cumulative actions meet the Scenic Integrity Objectives of the area. No significant cumulative impacts to the visual resource would result from this action coupled with past and reasonably foreseeable actions.